



Martyr Narratives in the *Historia Persecutionis* (HP) of Victor of Vita and His Guidelines for the Maintenance of Faith and Preservation of Moral Qualities

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Abstract

Victor of Vita believed that the Vandal persecution of the Christians in North Africa (429-489 AD) was a visitation of God to punish them for their immoral and dissolute life. In this context, suffering and torture are the logical results of profligacy, which Victor explains in Paulinian terms as a means of destroying the human body and thus releasing mankind from bondage to sin. Victor, therefore, advances arguments to convince the reader that torture contains both divine and redeeming qualities. The life of the martyr is portrayed as an encouragement so that the reader may emulate this conduct. The martyr narratives provide four measures for the preservation of moral values in civil society. They embody the ethical, exemplary, philosophical and inspiring dimensions of the martyr narratives in the *HP*. On this premise, the martyr narratives in the *HP* are to be regarded not only as a literary work, but also as a contribution to ethics.

Key concepts: persecution; suffering; torture; divine; martyr narratives.

Introduction

Who is Victor of Vita?

Victor of Vita, a Catholic clergy who would later become bishop and witness the persecutions, wrote the accounts of the martyrs in North Africa in his *Historia Persecutionis* (*HP*). The literature does not mention aspects of his life, but only that he witnessed the Vandal incursion in North Africa from 429 to 489 (Moorhead 1992:xv).

Background and Reasons for the Persecution

The Jews distanced themselves from the Christians and may even be regarded as the first persecutors of Christians. St. Stephen was stoned in 37 AD as a result of his break with the Jewish traditions. In his *Ad Nationes 1 and 4*, Tertullian deems the Jews to be the biggest enemies of Christian faith. Yet, Christianity and Judaism joined forces, since Christianity arose from the Jewish Old Testament. This close association between Christians and Jews would later have disastrous consequences for the Christians and caused the Jews' hate of Christians. The privileged position the Jews enjoyed in the Roman Empire during the reign of Tiberius declined. According to Frend, "[t]he Jews were regarded as irreconcilable enemies of the rest of humanity, and this charge, the *odium generis humani*, was to be passed to the Christians". Centuries earlier, Tacitus (*Ann xv:44*) referred to the Christians as *odium generis humani*.

The Christian faith developed in North Africa in the third century AD. In the course of time, the Christian church became increasingly favoured to such an extent that Theodocianus decreed that the Christian faith be raised to state religion. This meant that the Roman Empire (state) took the side of the Catholic Church against the Donatists. This favouritism of the state stirred up the Donatists' antagonism against the Catholic Church and the Roman state. In 404 AD, the Catholic Board of North African Bishops requested oppressive measures against the Donatists. At a conference held in 411 AD it was agreed that all Donatists be banned and that their property be confiscated. This resulted in the Donatists' increasing hate towards the Romans and the Catholic Christians. This attitude is one of the factors that caused the Vandal incursion in North Africa. Under the Roman government, the Donatists were also prohibited from holding meetings. The Roman government declared that supporters of the Donatists may not draw up wills and thus be beneficiaries. They were also declared unfit to enter into contracts. This legal incapacity of the Donatists, the Berbers and other non-Catholic communities caused the oppressed communities to seek an ally, namely the Vandals who invaded North Africa in 429 AD (Moorhead 1992:xii). The Donatists thus used this opportunity to avenge the Catholics who apparently were responsible for suppressing their faith.

When the Vandals invaded North Africa, the Donatists used this opportunity to attack and ransack villages and farms. The Vandals, who were previously persecuted by the Catholic Christians in ancient Western Europe, consequently hated Rome and threatened the Catholic Christians with severe punishments.

They were suspicious of the Catholic intellectuals who were subjected to insult and extremely severe abuse. Consequently, the Catholic bishops were banned, the churches closed, and sacraments such as baptism and confirmation were prohibited. Liturgy books were destroyed and church property was transferred to the Vandal intellectuals (Frend 1971:303). Now that the Vandals enjoyed the support of the local population (sects such as the Moors, the Donatists and the Circumcelliones), they persecuted the Catholic Christians: “[The] Vandals, as they invaded Africa, enjoyed the support of many Africans who were, for various reasons, unhappy with Roman government (Moorhead 1992:xii; Raven 1969:153).

The Functionality of the Martyr Narratives

It would appear that Victor wrote for both Christians and non-Christians: “There is clear internal evidence that the *HP* was at least partly aimed at eastern ears [...] [Courtois] emphasized a Byzantine audience in the Sacred Palace in Constantinople [...]” (Shanzer 2004:279). The *HP* must affect the believers and the waverers. According to Shanzer (2004:280), they are the target in Victor’s *HP*.

Victor’s martyr accounts, which emphasise bravery and are aimed at glorifying the steadfast, are also directed at other audiences (Shanzer 2004:286): “Victor’s stories that showcase fortitude under torture aim to glorify the steadfast, but they also would have reached another audience, those likely to lapse, for whom such tales of constancy might provide valuable stiffening.” However, Victor does not specifically mention who the other audiences are. He only mentions that it could refer to those people who would likely go astray.

Victor specifically addresses the Africa audience (Catholic Christians) of his time. By way of role models, Victor endeavoured to comfort his congregation in North Africa, to encourage them to remain steadfast in their faith, and to understand the divine and redeeming qualities of martyrdom (Fahey 1999:225). For example, the martyr’s *vita* urges the Christian reader or audience to emulate it, as in the prologue to *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Sayings of the Desert Fathers) (Grig 2004:4): “This book is an account of the virtuous asceticism and admirable way of life and also of the words of the holy and blessed fathers. They are meant to inspire and instruct those who want to imitate their holy lives, so that they may make progress on the way that leads to the kingdom of heaven.”¹ In his *HP*, Victor also wants the Christian reader to get hold of the Pauline concept that suffering has a redeeming quality.

In addition, Victor wishes that his martyr accounts should not be restricted to North Africa: “[Victor] wrote for a wide audience, both in Africa and abroad” (Fahey 1999:225), and that this book should meet with a wide response in society, such as, for instance, among the literate and the illiterate (Fahey 1999:234).

The perception that the martyr’s suffering guarantees his/her partnership in Christ is well established in the literature on martyrdom, which culminates in Victor’s work. The notion of the “liberating and shared” nature of suffering gives the Christian an opportunity to pay his/her debt to Christ. As such, s/he plays a role in his/her liberation (Fahey 1999:226).

Theology and Ideology of Martyrdom

According to Grig, Christians tend to emphasise the martyr’s presence, as when their accounts are repeated on their birthdays. The martyr is called up at the celebration of the holy mass in his/her *praesentia* (memory).

The aim of martyr accounts is to urge people, to bring them to their senses, and to instruct them; hence, the didactic nature of the martyr accounts. Grig (2004:4) explains: “[The] stories about saints were meant to act as models for believers”. Wyschogrod writes: “[Hagiography] is a narrative linguistic practice that recounts the lives of saints so that the reader or hearer can experience their imperative power” (Grig 2004:4). Martyr accounts also form the basis for maintaining an ascetic life. In addition, the didactic and exemplary nature of the martyr accounts endeavours to bridge the gap between the text and the reader. According to Grig (2004:5), Victor wants to make the martyr accounts accessible and intelligible to the readers.

The martyr accounts also tend to align Christianity and Judaism. The Syrian leader Antiochus IV’s persecution of the Jews in the second century was well known. Non-canonical Jewish texts afford the opportunity to express the climate in which Christian notions of martyrdom could possibly figure (Grig 2004:9). According to Grig, the Jewish hero Eleazar mentioned to the tyrant Antiochus that Eleazar’s death is to the advantage of Eleazar’s people: “[Make] my blood their purification and take my life as a ransom for theirs” (Grig 2004:10). Another example of the martyr accounts in 2 Maccabees is the case of the seven brothers, who, after Antiochus wanted to give them other insights by means of persuasion and threats, unanimously said to Antiochus: “[By] our suffering and endurance, we shall obtain the prize of virtue and shall be with God on whose account we suffer. But you, because of our foul murder, will suffer at the hand of divine justice the everlasting torment by the fire you deserve” (Grig 2004:10). From a theological perspective, this means that the martyr achieves immortality, whereas the persecutor is doomed to eternal torment. Consequently, this establishes a theological penance of the martyr who dies for his/her faith. Grig (2004:10) refers to this as “the righteous dead”.

¹ There is no mention of the author of the source.

John's Gospel emphasizes the voluntariness of Christ's death. Martyrs realize the *imitatio Christi* at their own death. The paradigmatic death of Christ is the object of emulation.² According to Grig, Ignatius of Antioch established a martyr mentality. She also opines that a martyr's death is part of the *imitatio Christi*. By dying as a martyr, man becomes a disciple of Christ and s/he will thus reach Christ (Grig 2004:17). Ignatius describes martyrdom as "killing earthly desires and lusts" (Grig 2004:17). The martyr's death is regarded as being his/her rebirth: "[The] birth pangs are upon me [...]" (Grig 2004:17). In his letters, Ignatius emphasizes the importance of physical suffering. He attempted to link Christ's physical suffering with his own approaching suffering (Grig 2004:17).

Martyrdom becomes the stage for theological and ecclesiological debate. Origen considers martyrdom a "chalice of salvation" (Orig, *Exhort. Ad Mart.* 28-9). The perception of a martyr's death as a second baptism (baptism in blood) is important for martyr theology. Origen writes: "[Through] a martyr's death we can baptize ourselves in our own blood and wash ourselves from every sin (Orig, *Exhort. Ad Mart.* 39). The martyr's blood serves as forgiveness.³ Grig (2004:18) is of the opinion that this lends the martyr a so-called freedom of speech before God. Such freedom of speech guarantees mediator status to the martyr –the ability to intercede for the earthly sinners.

The martyr should not seek suffering in order to obtain martyr status. Quintus, who voluntarily made himself available for martyrdom and convinced others to do the same, failed in his goal; thereafter, he worshipped false gods and gave them offerings: "[This] is the reason, brothers, that we do not approve of those who come forward of themselves: this is not the teaching of the Gospel" (Grig 2004:20). According to this, voluntary martyrdom is misleading.

God sends martyrdom. Tertullian is of the opinion that it is wrong to flee persecution. Cyprian believes that persecution is God's punishment for ill-discipline in the church. This can also be considered the result of society's sin (Grig 2004:20).

The martyr can be an intellectual, a lay person, a youth or an older person, man or woman, slave or free man. The martyr's low status can be used to good effect. Grig uses the example of the slave Blandina who was petite, weak and insignificant. Blandina proved that she was stronger than her mistress and thus she became a "noble athlete". She is also referred to as "noble mother", who could talk to public authorities with remarkable freedom of speech (Grig 2004:21-22).

True Power: The Torturer and the Tortured

The martyr wants to show that the notion of suffering is paradoxical. There is the perception that the use of violence encompasses the power of the torturer; the martyr shows the opposite. By way of their faith, the martyrs shift the pain from them onto the torturer: "[...] the persecutors will become the persecuted" (Grig 2004:70).

In *Passion of Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda*, Grig describes the torture of three young women. She explains that the proconsul sent the women off with the following words: "Leave me, for I am worn out now" (*Passio Maxima* 6). Maxima and Donatilla answered: "How can you be worn out after one hour? You have just arrived and you are already weary" (Grig 2004:70).

During his torture, the Abitinian martyr talked with his torturer. Grig points to the importance thereof: "[By] saying such things, it was the glorious martyr himself who tormented Anulinus even in the midst of his own great torments (*"in suis tormentis magis ipse torquebat"*) (Grig 2004:70; *Passio Dat.* 6). In *Passion of Isaac and Maximian*, the instruments of torture were considered ineffective. Grig (2004:70) writes: "[Now] the bundle of switches lay idle. They were deprived of their strength almost as if double-edged axes and pruning hooks had hacked them to pieces" (*Passio Isaac* 7).

The suffering body is recreated. The pain is transformed in such a way that the outsider or enemy cannot understand it. The Christian martyr deprives the torturer of any victory: "[T]he tortured is more steadfast than the torturer" (*tortore tortus acrior*) (Grig 2004:72). Vincent told his torturer: "[You] are mistaken, cruel man, if you think you are extracting punishment from me" (*Passio St. Vincent of Saragossa* 153-4). In Prudentius' *Peristephanon*, torture is regarded as an extension of Jesus' crucifixion. Grig explains that the body and its suffering are considered less important in *Peristephanon*. After Vincent's body is left to the wild animals, the latter refused to touch the body. When the body was thrown into the sea, it returned to the shore (*Passio St. Vincent* 465-512). Grig (2004:73) mentions that Prudentius declared a double victory for Vincent: "Victorious in violent death, you then triumph over death trampling victoriously over the enemy with your mere body."

Grig opines that martyrdom is important for discussions concerning miracles and resurrection. According to Augustine, martyrs are witnesses (*testes*) to the belief in the resurrection of Christ (Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* 22.9.3-4): "They suffered because they spoke the truth and because of this they can perform miracles. The first and the foremost of these truths is again, Christ's bodily resurrection and Christ's promise that we shall all share in it."

² Grig (2004:16): Jesus' request that the cup must be taken away from him and His instruction to the disciples to flee from village to village when they are being persecuted, are problematic for pro-martyr exegetes.

³ Grig's point of view differs from that of Kuyper in the introduction to Haemstedius' (1980:vi) collection of martyr accounts, namely: "*Christus bloed is het bloed des nieuwen Testaments geslort tot vergewing der zonden. In het bloed der martelaren is niefs dergelijks.*"

(Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* 22.10).

Augustinus believes that when miracles occur at tombs or in temples where remains are buried, this is so because God prefers it this way. The discovery of Stephan's remains led to many miracles, which are preserved in tracts known as the *Libelli*. Augustine urges his congregation to enter the tombs and temples to see the verses written there. He wants the people to read, preserve, treat with respect and study these verses: "In this way what is written down in the *libellus* will also be written down in the congregation's memory" (Augustinus *Sermones* 320).

The miracles that originate from martyrdom must be made known. These should not be restricted to a specific place, because if these are heard elsewhere as rumours, people will be skeptical about such miracles. An example emphasises the importance of making known and repeating martyr accounts or miracles. As mentioned earlier, Augustinus was very angry when he discovered that Innocentia, a devoted and noble woman in Carthage, did not make known her wonderful recovery from breast cancer. Grig (2004:103) writes: "Augustinus went back to Innocentia, rebuked her and made her relate the whole story to her companions, who then marveled and glorified God". Miracles must be told in order to be effective.

Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* provides a well-known example in Christian literature of God's judgement of believers who acted against Him. It appears that Victor endeavours to create an analogy between Eusebius' *Ecclesiastica History* and his *HP*. His theological concept of the history of the Vandal incursion in North Africa also seems to be an example of divine judgement. Wynn (1990:194) states: "That the Jews were punished by God through the Romans for rejecting Christ and persecuting his followers is a point repeatedly pressed by Eusebius/Rufinus and by Victor's time had become an exegetical commonplace".

Victor would later explain in the *HP* that God was angry with the Christians for their transgressions in Africa. Victor also believes that the famine and drought in 484 AD was a divine judgement: "At that time a famine occurred which was beyond belief, and it began to devastate the whole of Africa, laying it all waste. There was no rain then; not a single drop fell from heaven. This did not happen for no reason, but in accordance with the true and just judgment of God" (Victor of Vita *HP* III:55).

Consequently, he wants to create an apocalyptic expectation among his readers. He believes that, despite the famine and drought, Christians were saved by divine intercession. He based his version of the natural disaster on the work of Rufinus who, in turn, based his version on the Biblical story of the plague and darkness in Egypt (Ex. 10:23; Wynn 1990:195).

The Four Functions of Victor's Martyr Narratives in the *Historia Persecutionis*

In his *HP*, Victor attempts to recount the suffering endured by Christians under the Vandals in North Africa. He uses role models such as Quodvultdeus, Eugenius and Cyprian to convince the congregation to remain steadfast in their faith and to tell the community about the divine and redeeming qualities of suffering. Victor quotes a Biblical text from Exodus to back his thoughts: "The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew in strength" (Victor of Vita *HP* I:23; Ex. 1:12). He has this to say about bishops: "Nevertheless, when those [the bishops] who had been placed in exile died, others were not permitted to be ordained for their towns. Despite this, in the midst of these things, the people of God [the bishops] remained steadfast in the faith, and, like a swarm of bees' dwellings of wax, it was strengthened as it grew with the honeyed pebbles of faith" (Victor of Vita *HP* I:23).

With reference to this notion, and after Bishop Thomas was beaten in public, Victor states that he does not consider this to be an insult, but that he rather glorifies God. (Victor of Vita *HP* I:28). Victor thus lays the foundation for a theodicy associated with the Stoic Seneca's *De Providentia*, by describing Thomas as someone who believes that bad things happen and should not affect one.⁴

Ethical Function

The portrayal of the martyr's way of life must urge the readers to pursue their actions. Victor refers, among others, to Diogratias, a bishop in Carthage. For example, he prevented free-born men from being taken as slaves by the Vandals. Despite his age, Diogratias unexpectedly acted like a nurse when he did ward rounds with the doctors: "The blessed bishop acted like a good nurse. He continually went on rounds with the doctors, and food was brought behind him ...".⁵ This example also emphasizes the need for maintaining moral values in civil society. Victor's *HP* calls on, among others, Peter and Paul as examples to people to live a morally good life: "Intercede, you patriarchs, from whose lineage she who now labours on the earth was born; pray, you holy prophets, who see afflicted the one of whom you formerly sang in prophetic utterance; be her supporters, you apostles, you who ran to and fro across the whole world like swift horses so that you might bring her together as the Lord ascended over you. Especially you, blessed Peter, why do you not speak on behalf of the sheep and lambs

⁴ Seneca III:1: "Nunc illud dico, ista quae tu vocas aspera, quae adversa et abominanda, primum pro ipsis esse quibus accidunt, deinde pro universis, quorum maior diis cura quam singulorum est, post hoc volentibus accidere ac dignos malo esse, si nolint. His adiciam fato ista sic et recte eadem lege bonis evenire qua sunt boni..."

⁵ Victor of Vita *HP* I:26. Victor of Vita *HP* I:23: "So it was that he took on himself every burden, sparing neither his weary limbs nor his decayed old age".

entrusted to you by the Lord of all, in his great care and concern? You, holy Paul, teacher of the gentiles, who preached the gospel of God ‘from Jerusalem as far as Illyricum’ (Rom. 15:19), recognize what the Arian Vandals are doing, and your captive sons who groan in lamentation; and all you holy apostles, groan for us in unison” (Victor of Vita *HP* III:69).

A similar sentiment, mentioned earlier and in need of attention in this instance, is Salvianus’ opinion. He believed that the Vandals’ persecution of the Christians in North Africa is a punishment from God. The Christians in North Africa were immoral and led profligate lives (Moorhead 1992:x). By virtue of this, the martyr accounts in the *HP* should not only be a literary work, but also provide education in ethics. Due to its ethical dimension, the *HP* will have influence not only locally, but also on the non-Christian: “[...] the faithful and the waverers [...] they were the target audience, the sympathetic eyes and ears” (Shanzer 2004:280).

Exemplary Function

The martyr accounts must serve as a model for believers (Grig 2004:4). Grig believes that, in the past, the Christian martyr accounts were exemplary and didactic. On account of their nature, such martyr accounts attempt to influence the reader. For instance, Victor writes about Dionysia, who urged her son, despite the suffering he still had to endure, to maintain his martyrdom.⁶ Seneca states that Regulus is associated with martyrdom. Fate turned him into an example of loyalty and patience. Consequently, people learn from Regulus: He is an example of the more severe the torture is, the greater will be the fame.⁷

On account of the exemplary or didactic dimension, martyr accounts serve as bridge between the text and the reader’s world (Grig 2004:5). Consequently, the martyr accounts must be portrayed in a positive manner for the reader or audience. More emphasis should be placed on the heroic behaviour of the martyr rather than on the graphic description of the atrocities during the persecution. Moorhead believes that this is, however, not the case with Victor’s martyr accounts. Moorhead (1992:x) states: “He [Victor] proceeds to give a minutely detailed account of numerous atrocities inflicted on the Catholics in the proconsular province.”

In discussing the heroic attitude of the martyr, Van Henten and Avemarie (2002:100) allege that Blandina, a martyr of slave origin, who communicated with God during her suffering, did not endure any physical pain: “Blandina communicates with Him during her final suffering, not feeling the wounds caused by the horns of the bull”. Of course, people should not shy away from problems and difficulties and complain about their fate. They should take whatever comes their way in a positive manner and turn it into something good. According to Seneca, it is not important what you endure, but how you endure it.⁸ According to Policarp, physical pain should be considered less important and martyrdom should be accepted as “[...] a deliverance after death” (Van Henten and Avemarie 2002:114).

As far as the exemplary or didactic nature of martyr accounts is concerned, people become martyrs because other people make martyrs of them. Henten and Avemarie (2002:7) state that “[m]artyrs are exemplary figures who exemplify the ideal way of life”. Van Henten and Avemarie’s approach shows similarities with Origen’s *Exhortations to martyrdom*, in which martyrs are role models. Van Henten and Avemarie (2002:8) thus transcend cultural boundaries when they point to the similarities between the Jewish Maccabee accounts and the Biblical heroes.

Philosophical Function

Martyrs also have a philosophical role. Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle consider martyrs to be model figures who attain their goal by self-sacrifice:⁹ “Aristotle characterises a virtuous person as somebody who is prepared to sacrifice himself for one’s friends and one’s homeland and, if necessary, to die for it. He also holds that it would be better to live one year nobly than many years in an ordinary way” (Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 1169a; Van Henten and Avemarie 2002:11).

Victor’s martyr account of Servus shows clear similarities with Seneca’s description of the philosophical model of Cato who had to die a second time: “*Inde fuit diis immortalibus satis spectare Catonem semel. Retenta ac revocata virtus est, ut in difficiliore parte se ostenderet; non enim tam magno animo mors initur quam repetitur*” (I would therefore believe that the wound was neither secure nor sufficiently effective; it did not suffice for the immortal god

⁶ Victor of Vita *HP* 111:22-3: “And because she had a full knowledge of the Divine Scriptures, she strengthened others for their martyrdom ... When she saw that her only son, who was still of tender years and rather delicate, was afraid and in dread of the punishments, she strengthened him by casting wounding glances and threatening him with her motherly authority to such an extent that he was turned into someone far stonger than his mother”.

⁷ Seneca *De Providentia* III:9: “*Veniamus ad Regulum: quid illi fortuna nocuit, quod illum documentum fidei, documentum patientiae fecit? Figunt cutem clavi et quocumque fatigatum corpus reclinavit, vulneri incumbit, in perpetuam vigiliam suspensa sunt lumina. Quanto plus tormenti tanto plus erit gloriae*”.

⁸ Seneca II:4: “*Scias licet idem viris bonis esse faciendum, ut dura ac difficilia non reformident nec de facto querantur, quicquid accidit boni consulant, in bonum vertant. Non quid sed quemadmodum feras interest*”.

⁹ Seneca III:5: “*Idem facit fortuna: fortissimos sibi pares quaerit, quosdam fastidio transit. Contumacissimum quemque et rectissimum aggreditur, adversus quem vim suam intendat: ignem experitur in Mucio, paupertatem in Fabricio, exilium in Retilio, tormenta in Regula, venenum in Socrate, mortem in Catone*”.

to see Cato only once. His bravery was withheld and recalled so that it is described in an even more cruel role, because to die does not require such a great spirit or soul than to seek it a second time) (Seneca II:12).

Servus, who was already tortured at the time of Genseric, experiences a second torture for the sake of protecting the Christian faith. He did not want to make public his friend's secrets that are associated with the Christian faith. For the sake of maintaining the faith and the friendship, Servus chose to offer himself as martyr. Victor (*HP* III:25) mentions: "And if he faithfully displayed his faith for the sake of a man, and no gain, how much more must he have done so for the sake of the One who will render to him a reward for that faith?"

With reference to this, Apollonius of Tyana states that every person must sacrifice him-/herself for the sake of freedom, friends and loved ones (Van Henten and Avemarie 2002:11). Victor names Cyprian as such an example. The latter was willing to give his life for his fellow believers. Victor alleges that Cyprian gave everything he had to the needy believers.¹⁰

Examples of such sacrifices in ancient times are the suicides of Socrates and of Thrasea Paetus. Both Jewish and Christian martyrs share the same opinion regarding Socrates' death. They consider *devotio* (devotion) as the last way out to victory. *Devotio* means: "... the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the well-being of a group or a major cause" (Van Henten and Avemarie 2002:19). Van Henten and Avemarie emphasise Socrates' exemplary obedience to the laws as against the opinion of others. Socrates was afforded the opportunity to escape in order to avoid the death penalty. He rather opted to subject himself to those laws that would be responsible for his death.

Martyr accounts should be repeated (Grig 2004:5): "[...] the cult of the martyrs, whose stories would be told and re-told, time collapsing with the repetition of the *acta* (representation), the martyr evoked again with the celebration of mass at his/her *memoria (praesentatio)*."

Victor states the following on the transfer of martyr accounts: "One should never remain silent [...] and there can be nothing shameful in something which contributes to the praise of one who suffers" (Victor of Vita *HP* I:28). On account of this, martyr accounts have important implications for practising religion, especially with respect to the worship of martyrs in church services.

These accounts can also be used in spiritual power politics. Power plays an important role in the establishment of religion (Grig 2004:6). According to this, martyrs serve as mediators between God and man. The following conditions apply in order to have the power or ability of a martyr: "[...] prayer, possession of relics, being buried near a martyr, building something in honour of a martyr" (Grig 2004:6).

Man transcends to a higher level by dying like a martyr. Although Victor does not mention whether Victoria died as the result of torture, he does confirm that the martyr is transported from the earthly to the divine: "[Lifted] her affections far above the earth and despised the world with its desires" (Victor of Vita, *HP* III:26). The supernatural vision of the martyr, which is typically Christian, holds out hope for rebirth after death; in other words, immortality.¹¹ As far as the torture of Dionysia is concerned, Victor (*HP* III:23) writes: "The punishment to be feared is the one which will never end and the life to be desired is the one which will be enjoyed for ever". Perceptions of an eternal life are essential for the development of a material concept: "[Why] [...] wished to enjoy glory for a little while and perish for eternity?" (Victor of Vita *HP* III:51; *HP* III:23). In addition, Victor (*HP* III:27) writes: "I would not act in such a way as to enjoy glory for a short and passing period while being ungrateful to my Creator who had faith in me". Grig (2004:10) alleges that a martyr is considered "[...] a ransom for the sin of our nation".

Incentive Function

The paradigmatic death of Jesus is the martyr's object of emulation (*imitatio Christi*). Grig (2004:17) states: "[...] it is by dying in this way that he becomes a disciple, in this way [...] he reaches Jesus".

The martyr account also aims to encourage men to persevere, despite suffering. Accordingly, suffering or torture is a natural consequence of man's sin. In Pauline context, Victor (*HP* I:35) states that torture destroys the sinful body and that man will thereafter no longer be the slave of sin: "She lives on, a virgin and the mother of many virgins of God". A Biblical verse also echoes this concept (Fahey 1999): "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin."

Martyr accounts are crucial for martyr ideology and lead to a Christian identity. Punishments imposed on

¹⁰ Victor of Vita *HP* II:33: "It was then that the blessed pontiff Cyprian, the bishop of Unizibir, approached them. An excellent comforter, he encouraged them individually with an affectionate and fatherly kindness, not without rivers of flowing tears, prepared to 'lay down his life for the brothers' (1 John 3:6) and of his own accord to deliver himself up to like sufferings, if he were allowed. He spent all that he had on his needy brothers in their present necessity, for he sought a way of being associated with the confessors, being a confessor himself in spirit and virtue".

¹¹ Grig (2004:9). McBrien, (1980): glossary. Eschatology literally means "the study of the last things". This focuses on the Kingdom of God, judgement day, heaven, hell, resurrection and the second coming of Christ.

a martyr do not spiritually affect the victim, but rather affect those who take delight therein.¹² According to Prudentius, such punishments result in the victim's rebirth. Grig (2004:72) alleges that, in his *Peristephanon*, Prudentius considers torture an extension of Christ's suffering. According to Fahey (1999:235), "[t]hrough the acceptance of their suffering, the members of the community share in Christ's Passion and witness the end of their sinfulness". As such, the martyrs take part in the redeeming grace of Christ's blood (Grig 2004:72).

Hieronymus describes the magical power of the martyr: "[...] when he [Hieronymus] has been angry, or has harboured evil thoughts, he does not dare enter the basilicas of the martyrs, but shudders in body and soul" (Grig 2004:90). The martyr's remains are of similar nature to those of God. According to this, physical suffering serves as the perfection of Christ's suffering. Fahey (1999:235) opines that earthly suffering is not unreasonable: "[...] rather it is a necessary part of the way of salvation". According to Grig (2004:92), Victorius is of the opinion that martyrs are advocates and well-meaning judges who can ease sentences.

Conclusion

Victor specifically addresses the Africa audience of his time; he endeavours to comfort his congregation in North Africa; he encourages them to remain steadfast in their faith, and he impresses upon them the divine and redeeming nature of torture. Victor also wishes that his martyr accounts should not be restricted to North Africa. They should be met with a wide response by all people in society, such as the literate, the simple or a mixture of both. Victor believes that the martyrs' sufferings guarantee to them participator status with Christ.

Martyr narratives purport to bring people to inspection and it instruct. In light of this contention, the martyr narratives in the *Historia Persecutionis* serve a fourfold function, namely the ethical, the exemplary, the philosophical and the incentive function. According to these functional episodes, it is safe to deduct that the martyr narratives are didactic in nature and they also underlay the virtues for the upholding of an ascetic regimen or lifestyle. The blood of the martyrs render to them a special favour with God – a freedom of speech between God and mere mortal man. Such a freedom of speech guarantee to a martyr intermediary status, the ability to make intercession for sinners. On the grounds hereof, one is reminded of the importance of the fourfold functions of the martyrs' narratives in Victor of Vita's *Historia Persecutionis*.

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¹² Seneca *De Providentia* III:2: "... quaedam incommoda pro is esse quibus accident".